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ABSTRACT

This topical bibliography and commentary addresses methods of alternative, or informal, assessment that have proven effective, and how these methods have been, or can be, established as reliable alternatives to standardized testing. It discusses authentic assessment, forms of alternative assessment (unstructured written activities, unstructured oral activities, and structured activities), and reliability of alternative assessments. It concludes that as teachers learn how to measure authentic assessment techniques "consistently and accurately" parents and administrators will gain a greater sense of confidence with alternative assessment methods. Contains 10 references and annotated links to 2 Internet resources. (RS)

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Alternative Forms of Assessment

Carl B. Smith, Editor
Darra M. Ellis, Copy Editor

Introduction

The primary responsibility of teachers is to teach and assess what students have learned (Hannon, 1997, 5). For years educators have depended on formal assessment, or standardized tests which are "designed to provide the best match possible to what is perceived to be the "typical" curriculum at a specific grade level" (Navarrete, 1990, 1). Recent research indicates that there has been an overreliance on standardized testing. In response, alternative forms of assessment are being suggested which deal with the problems posed by standardized testing (Navarrete, 1, Bullens, 2002). This summary will address methods of alternative, or informal, assessment that have proven effective, and how these methods have been, or can be, established as reliable alternatives to standardized testing.

Authentic Assessment

Burke defines assessment as "the process of gathering evidence of what a student can do..." (Burke, 1994). For years the method has been to offer multiple choice tests which measure memory. Because this type of response does not match the way students learn in the classroom, educators consider authentic assessment to be a more reliable approach to assessment. "Authentic assessment is a term used to describe real tasks that require students to *perform* and/or *produce* knowledge rather than *reproduce* information others have discovered" (Newman, cited in Burke, 1993). Emphasis is placed not only on the student's knowledge, but on what the student can do with that knowledge. As the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics recognizes, this emphasis necessitates a shift in content, teaching and assessment (NCTM, 1995, 2).

Forms of Alternative Assessment

Informal assessments can be divided into two categories: unstructured (e.g. student work samples, journals) and structured (e.g. checklists, observations). While unstructured methods are not as easy to evaluate, they provide valuable information concerning the student's skill level. Unstructured techniques can be further subdivided into oral and written activities (Navarrete, 3).

Unstructured written activities

- *Homework:* work students have done independently
- *Logs or Journals:* students may use their own method of writing, teachers review the work on a regular basis
- *Writing Samples:* consist of scripts for plays, newspapers, language experience stories

Written activities allow the student to participate in evaluating and remediating their own work. They can also be tailored to meet the student's interest and ability level.

Unstructured oral activities

- *Games:* used to increase skills in areas such as math and spelling where specific knowledge can be addressed.
- *Debates:* oral skills can be evaluated as well as their ability to understand concepts and share them with others.
- *Brainstorming:* gives teacher feedback on current knowledge of a given topic.
- *Story Retelling:* determines whether the student understands main theme of stories as well as their ability to organize elements of a story into a coherent whole.

Oral exercises offer teachers immediate feedback concerning a student's knowledge and provide information on a wide-range of language-based abilities (Navarrete, 3-5).

Structured activities require more teacher planning, but are easier to evaluate. The following is a list of suggestions compiled primarily from the research of Malehorn and Navarrete.

1. *Rating Scales:* This method takes the checklist assessment one step farther. "Rather than recording the 'presence' or 'absence' of a behavior or skill, the observer subjectively rates each item according to some dimension of interest" (Navarrete, 6). An example would be rating a student on the different elements of a project or class presentation.
2. *Cloze Test:* This procedure measures reading comprehension and contextual clues by asking students to fill in the blanks of a text taken from a topic they have been studying.
3. *Criterion*-referenced Tests or Mastery Learning: "Students know exactly what is expected of them, and they continue their efforts without penalty until these expectations are fulfilled" (Malehorn, 323). In order to accurately reflect the instructional objectives, criterion-referenced tests are often developed by the teacher.
4. *Multiple Marks:* This method of assessment attempts to reflect the variety of educational objectives within each subject. Multi-faceted grading and reporting procedures are developed that reflect all stages of the learning process as opposed to giving each subject one grade which represents many educational experiences and assessment criteria.
5. *Pupil Profile:* This technique can be used in place of, or to supplement, multiple marks. As students complete tasks meeting specific objectives, "line-graph profiles are drawn on the record sheet" (Malehorn, 324). This graph provides students with a visual representation of their growth.
6. *Observation:* Bredekamp and Rosegrant (cited in Hannon, 2) propose that "[a]s teachers regularly observe children engaged in a wide array of activities and systematically record what they observe, they are building the evidence base fro which to make inferences, extend students' learning strategies, and communicate students' development to parents." Observation is considered essential to authentic assessment. In order for observation to be meaningful, it is important for teachers to have a system for preserving and using these observations.

   Methods Used in Observing

   - *Anecdotal:* This method requires ongoing record keeping by the teacher to record a student's progress in academics and behavior. Computers make this method more feasible.
   - *Naturalistic:* Similar to anecdotal, the teacher writes a brief account of the school day reflecting the atmosphere of the class.
   - *Checklist:* "This method identifies specific objectives to be marked off as they are attained" (Malehorn, 1994, 324). This observational technique is considered reliable because teachers check whether or not the student has met the objective. The Checklist can also be tailored to meet the individual needs of students, eliminating comparisons between students. Not all researchers agree on the value of checklists. Bredekamp and Rosegrant (as cited in Hannon, 1997, 3) caution that checklists are not as rich in details as observational notes.
7. *Contracted Learning*: Teachers give students more responsibility for their learning by arranging agreements with their students. Students participate in choosing topics of study, materials used, time limits and the evaluation process.
8. *Credit/No Credit:* A variation of the pass/fail method, "[t]he rationale for this approach is that it allows students to explore safely unfamiliar areas of inquiry" (Malehorn, 323). Professionals have found that unless this method is applied throughout the school, students will tend to put more energy into a graded class and become negligent in their credit/no credit classes.
9. *Peer Evaluation:* The presupposition for this method is that if students are not longer competing for grades, they will work together for the common intellectual welfare of each other. Cooperative learning becomes the motivation of the class and unethical behaviors (cheating, manipulation, etc.) are no longer necessary.
10. *Self-Evaluation*: Students are constantly evaluating themselves outside the classroom in clubs, sports and other extra-curricular activities. Allowing students to report on their own progress in learning brings into the classroom what already occurs outside school. Students can do this through questionnaires designed by the teacher or structured interviews with the teacher.
11. *Portfolios*: "Portfolios allow students to show their *process* and their *products* as well as to move learning from the abstract to the concrete... (Valdez, 2001). The portfolio has emerged as one of the more powerful tools for assessment and evaluation in education." (Burke, v). Providing much more than a grade, the portfolio allows the observer to see the student's though process and progress over time.

Items which should be included in the portfolio are artwork, peer evaluation, computer programs, self-assessment, musical pieces, logs and journals, observation checklists, videos and performances, projects, cooperative works, interviews, simulations, tests, essays, stories and other items which demonstrate the student's though process (Malehorn, 324 & Burke, viii).

Material also needs to be included which demonstrates "student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection" (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991 as cited in Lankes, 1995, 3). Storage concerns are no longer an issue with implementing the portfolio system of assessment, because of computer technology. Large amounts of audio and written information can be stored on CD-ROMs which can be transported from class to class and school to school (Lankes, 1995, 4).

Reliability of Alternative Assessments

Standardized tests have been considered a reliable means of assessment because "their technical manuals report validity and reliability characteristics" (Navarrete, 8). What the manuals do not report is whether the test matches the instructional objectives of the course being tested. Both Navarrete and Oosterhof argue that if the objectives and test content do not match, then the testing cannot be considered reliable (Navarrete, 8; Oosterhof, 8-9)

As the emphasis in assessment shifts to alternative means, reliability can begin to "be established by demonstrating that the information obtained from a given technique reflects the project's instructional goals and objectives" (Navarrete, 8). Oosterhof proposes that this first begins with educating the teachers on how to use informal assessment (Oosterhof, 8).

Once the teachers understand how to use informal assessment, they must also consider reliable scoring procedures. According to Navarrete, there are three elements to reliable scoring of informal assessments:

- Teachers must be trained to score according to a set criterion in order to avoid depending on the opinion of raters;
- Scores must match the learning situations;
- Scoring procedures take time, proper training must be given (9).

Oosterhof also links reliability of assessment to the teacher's understanding of the subject matter being taught. After observing the assessment methods of 15 public school teachers he concluded:

> "With respect to informal assessments, the content again appeared to be more goal driven when the teacher had a deeper understanding of the content. Informal questions asked of students were more typically created by the teacher. The teacher seemed more likely to adapt the content of oral questions in response to students' answers. When a teacher had a more shallow understanding of the subject matter, the teacher depended more heavily on exercises provided with the curriculum. Activities appeared to be more activity driven" (Oosterhof, 9).

Conclusion

As schools continue to search for more accurate assessments of student performance, authentic and performance-based measures are "becoming part of a 'new wave' of assessment in the classroom... Several school districts across the United States have reported improved student performance associated with new assessment programs" (Herman, 1992 as cited in Lankes, 1995). Authentic assessment is a student-centered approach to learning which allows the teacher "to focus on both the learner and our goals for that learner" (Johnson, 1993 as cited in Hannon, 1997, 2). While it is centered on the student, it requires insightful observational skills on the part of the teacher, as well as strong knowledge in the subject matter being taught. Teachers must also be able to "analyze the data and make significant inferences that will lead to further growth for the child" (Martin, 1996 as cited in Hannon, 1997, 2).

In order for any child's educational process to be successful, there must be clear communication between the parents and the teachers. Authentic assessment procedures allow the teacher to observe and document specific information about students which can be shared with parents. Samples of a child's work, along with observational notes, anecdotal and naturalistic records, allow the parent to better understand their child's though processes (Hannon, 6).

Navarrete argues that "[i]nformal techniques are valid if they measure the skills and knowledge imparted by the project; they are reliable if they measure consistently and accurately" (2). As teachers learn how to measure authentic assessment techniques "consistently and accurately" parents and administrators will gain a greater sense of confidence with alternative assessment methods.

Internet Resources

*Ensuring Equity with Alternative Assessments
This webpage provides resources and suggestions regarding developing, selecting, and administering alternative assessments. A website designed by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.
http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assment/as800.htm

*Assessment Reform: Are We Making Progress?
This article provides a brief summary of findings from a recently released study of assessment reform. Also includes internet links related to performance assessment.
http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin059.shtml

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